

**Workshop 4**

**Vigilance, imagination, courage: the role of the Teacher in  
Prison Education**

**Cormac Behan, Ireland**

## Introduction

In 1842 Charles Dickens visited the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. He reflected on the penitential system, a revolutionary new form of imprisonment, which he thought, was "rigid, strict and hopeless solitary confinement". He believed in "its effects to be cruel and wrong" (Dickens, 1842, p.90). "In its intention I am well convinced that it is kind, humane and meant for reformation" but despite the well meaning objectives of those who established the prison it "wears the mind into a moribund state, which renders it unfit for the rough contact and busy action of the world" (Dickens, 1842, pp.90 & 99).

Over one hundred and sixty years later, despite numerous policy changes, political debates, the best intentions of prison reformers and the negative attitudes of the 'Prison Works' agenda, there is still no agreement on the theory of imprisonment. The objectives of imprisonment in the modern world are confused; they range from deterrence to retribution and from punishment to rehabilitation. This confusion makes it imperative that we consider the role of imprisonment and reflect on the contribution of education within such an institution.

This paper will argue that as educators we must distinguish ourselves from current penal policy and avoid the concepts and concerns of those who may have a different agenda and ethos. To achieve this we must challenge the current penal orthodoxy and create an alternative discourse within and without prison walls.

## Vigilance

Penal policy in Ireland is following the Anglo-American model with a sharp increase in incarceration. This is in contrast with the more humane penal policy of some European countries, especially the Nordic nations (Rentzmann, 1996; Raundrup & Langelid, 2004). In the USA over the past twenty years, the numbers incarcerated have nearly quadrupled, reaching two million by 2002 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). In Britain the prison population has increased nearly one hundred percent over the last thirteen years. In 1992 there were 40,600 in British prisons; (James, 2001, p.3) by early 2004 there were nearly 75,000 (Morris, 2004, p.1). The situation in Ireland is also alarming. The number of prisoners increased from 2,210 in 1995 to 3,200 by 2003 (Irish Prison Service, 2004). In early 2005, the Irish government announced the closure of one of its oldest prisons, and its replacement with an Irish version of the failed supermax prison that sprung up across America in the 1990s. The current penal policy would have us believe that increasing numbers of prison spaces would lead to a decrease in the crime rate. But as Alan Elsner reminded readers in his damning critique of the US prison system, this is not necessarily the case. Once prisons are built they will be filled because "perpetuating, self-generating growth is now largely built into the system." No politician will speak out against the rush to incarcerate, as "being labeled as 'soft on crime' is still politically fatal" (Elsner, 2004, p.218).

Changes in penal policy can impact on education within the prison regime. As educators we should take the time and space to reflect on our philosophy and ideology because in the rush to 'get things done' (Thompson, 1996) we can fail to examine what we are trying to do. In a prison education context, we can allow the negative attitude of current penal policy to dominate and interfere with our practice. Education cannot be detached from the location and context in which it takes place.

The agenda of the prison authorities contrasts in many ways with the philosophical ideas that underpin the pedagogical process. We must be careful about being subsumed into the prison agenda. We must be vigilant to avoid the language of the correctional and business models that use concepts such as input, output, throughput, targets and performance indicators. The vocabulary of pedagogy rejects the labeling of learners as clients, consumers or customers. Language is a powerful weapon in the battle of ideas and we should begin that encounter by identifying and recognising the significant differences between "prison and school cultures, policies and practices" (Wright, 2004, p.207).

William Forster points out that trends in penology and criminology have an effect upon the way prisons are run (Forster, 1981, p.56). The current penal discourse takes for granted that the recidivist rate is the main indicator of the success or otherwise of education within prison. It fails to take into account other factors outside the control of either teachers or students such as the nature of the prison regime, location, length of sentence, inhumane conditions, and alienation from society (Forster, 1981 pp.58-60). But we are not in a position to dismiss the debate about the recidivist rate because in the present climate "prison education tends to be based on whether its courses can be seen to reduce recidivism" (Costelloe & Warner, 2003, p.2). However, the over-emphasis on the recidivist rate and at times its use as the sole means of measurement is particularly damaging to the ongoing debate about education within prison.

We can remind prison authorities that research, especially in the USA and Canada, shows that those who completed studies while in prison are less likely to re-offend on their release (Vacca, 2004; Chappell, 2004). We can also justify our position by pointing out that appropriate education and a well-attended school "leads to a more humane and tolerable environment in which to live and work, not only for the inmates but also for the officers, staff and everyone else" (Vacca, 2004, p.298). Even on the business model, increasingly being used by prisons, we can claim success. If inmates do not return to prison, this can save the taxpayer millions each year. We can justify our practice even on their narrow terms. We can critique their system by example, showing how successful our students have been, even with all the challenges that they encounter.

In this debate, we need to remind society of the damage prison does to people. Irish Prison Education policy literature points out that among the objectives of prison education are to help prisoners cope with their sentences and achieve personal development (Irish Prison Education Service, 2004, p.4). There is so much outside the control of teachers and students that can impinge on our educational space, Warner concludes, "it would be outrageous to measure the work of those teachers by recidivism rates" (Warner, 2000, p.9). As Forster notes: "Whether the recidivism rate is low or high, there are so many other factors involved as well as education...that it would be difficult to demonstrate any relationship between it and education" (Forster, 1981, p.58). Creating a successful educational process is such a complex, social, cultural and interpersonal dynamic that it would reduce the integrity of our profession if we were to quantify its success using methods that have little relevance to our role as pedagogues. Using the recidivist rate as the guide to success reduces the pedagogical process to a technology that is anathema to adult education.

We need to create an alternative discourse about how we define our progress. We should shift the focus of our argument from a defensive position to a positive one.

This might be achieved by arguing for a different approach to education than what the prison authorities may want. Mezirow's theory of Transformative Learning (1996) has a lot to offer prison educators. It encourages individuals to challenge the way they make meaning in the world. This requires transforming frames of reference which begins with critical reflection, i.e. assessing one's assumptions and presuppositions. It begins with encouraging students to engage in critical thinking which, according to Stephen Brookfield (1986; 1987) is what we should strive for in an adult education process. This is not an abstract, rarefied process that is observed in classrooms and undergraduate essays. Rather, he argues, it is an activity "embedded in the vivid contexts of adults' everyday lives" (Brookfield, 1987, p.228). This is the beginning of liberating learning.

While encouraging individuals to move away from criminal activity is a very valid objective, we need to redefine the debate and explore with our students issues such as community, civil society and how they might engage with it by becoming agents for change. By engaging in criminal activity, students have broken the bonds of community. We should encourage students to reflect on this in a more developed way. Undoubtedly, prisoners, by committing a crime, have hurt their victims, damaged themselves, their communities and their families. We can moralise to them about their negative activity, which the penal system does, or we can encourage them to challenge their behaviour in a more holistic way. Challenging prisoners to interrogate how they re-connect with civil society and reestablish the bonds of community can be a powerfully transformative experience that might encourage them to turn away from their life of crime. This requires a different type of education. It gives students the opportunity to engage in "the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of socio-cultural reality that shape their lives and their capacity to transform that reality" (Freire, 1970, p.27).

Defining success in any educational process is difficult. However, it is a multifaceted process that cannot be reduced to targets and business plans. Adult education has also moved beyond the rather narrow and hierarchical methods of assessment that have come to dominate in other branches of education. The accumulation of skills and the acquisition of knowledge are valid objectives but prison teachers are especially aware that non-traditional and informal education is very important in the prison environment. But since this is difficult (even for ourselves) to quantify, we can neglect to defend the importance of such pedagogy and buy into the assessment and targets debate. We must evaluate our activities, examine ideas such as students' willingness to co-operate, teamwork, shared responsibility, etc. (Raundrup & Langelid, 2004). As Raundrup and Langelid note in their report on the Nordic model of prison education:

"The education and training needs may be formal in nature to a great extent but a major need for informal skills has also been identified (life skills, the ability to function in a team, at work, in society, in the family etc.)...The teaching must...in the prison environment, be epitomized by the development of qualitative characteristics, self confidence, the ability to solve problems, creativity, the ability to learn new things and to collect and evaluate information". (Raundrup & Langelid, 2004, p.9)

Teachers must be vigilant and careful not to buy into or unconsciously be co-opted onto an agenda that is the latest penal trend. We must open up a debate amongst educators about how we define our success and from a confident position argue that within the penal system and wider community. In his address to prison educators in 2004, the Irish academic Ted Fleming reminded us of the goals and

objective of our pedagogy. He concluded that adult education helps create spaces in which adults can discuss the kind of society we live in and the kind of world we wish to create.

"We are capable of dreaming of a different world in which there might be justice, care, freedom and an end to violations. This learning is social, political, critical, and seeks to change systems and institutions that are now operated in the interests of few so that they operate in the interests of all". (Fleming, 2004, p.6)

### Imagination

The Council of Europe document on Education in Prison (1990) argues that "the education of prisoners must in its philosophy, methods and content, be brought as close as possible to the best adult education in society outside" (Council of Europe, 1990, p.14). However, Costelloe and Warner point out that the perception of prison education as simply adult education in a different setting is no longer good enough. "While the principles must mirror best practice on the outside, its rationale must be appraised within the prison context" (Costelloe & Warner, 2003, pp.2-3). The routine of prison must be met with the flexibility and creativity of our practice. That requires imagination to create a positive learning space for a unique learner group. We must be constantly looking to develop our curriculum and examine our pedagogy. It is not only what we teach but it is also our approach to learning that distinguishes adult education. Creating a space for transformative learning (Mezirow) and promoting critical reflection are also important, even imperative in a prison setting. Giving students the opportunity to overcome the constraints of imprisonment and encouraging them to take responsibility within an educational space can begin the process of empowerment and critical thinking. But we must be especially imaginative as we recognize that prison environments "are not rich in verbal and sensory stimuli" (Vacca, 2004, p.302).

Giving inmates' responsibility, respect and encouraging independence begins to restore their self-esteem and helps create equality in the learning space. There are a number of ways students can be encouraged to take responsibility in the school/classroom. Allowing them to present a class on a topic of their choice is one method. Initially students are hesitant because of a lack of confidence and experience. But a successful outcome to this class can be transformative for students as they receive a boost in confidence and positive peer affirmation. The recognition of their potential can start the process of self-belief, leading them towards the concept of human agency, the confidence to believe they can be agents for change. As the Council of Europe (1990) notes, we should not hesitate to take on controversial social and political issues in the learning space, as these are issues that inform our learners' lifeworld. Discussions on a range of issues can be facilitated; even reflection on the social and political context of the prison is possible, while remaining critical of a prisoner's past activities.

The Council of Europe argues that, "education should be constantly seeking ways to link prisoners with the outside community and to enable both groups to enact with each other as fully and constructively as possible" (Council of Europe, 1990, p.14). This is essential if we are to encourage inmates to reconnect with civil society and play their part in that society both inside and outside prison. Bringing the outside into the prison can be a very empowering experience for a group. For example, students can organize this activity by inviting in a public speaker/visitor of their choice. There are certain constraints to this activity (i.e. contacting an individual directly) but once these are overcome students can take control of the process. They can decide the agenda, write a leaflet to be distributed to each cell and design a poster for the various parts of the prison. They can also prepare resources for the

visitor and other students. A student can chair the meeting. This can be a very empowering experience, creating independence not only for the students who organize the event but also for all the students who leave behind their prison surroundings for a period in an autonomous learning space. An example of this occurred in our prison last year when we organized Europe Day to coincide with the accession of ten new states to the European Union. This was especially relevant as Ireland held the European presidency and there was a sense of excitement in the outside community about the accession. This was a cross-curricular information day that included a guest speaker, a European quiz, food from different European countries prepared by students for their fellow students. It gave students the opportunity to take responsibility; it stimulated their interest and encouraged them to reflect on their capacity as independent individuals regardless of the institution.

Another method of trying to achieve autonomy in the learning space is organising debates with local schools/universities. This can be an ideal opportunity for prisoner students to interact with other students, while gaining recognition for their academic abilities. Students can take control of preparations for their team with the teacher acting as facilitator. They can decide the topic, divide up the various aspects to be covered, discuss tactics, create their own agenda and elect a captain for their team. During the debate they are in control. It usually attracts other non-students to the school to support their team in a spirit of healthy competition. It is a positive method of empowering students and creating equality with students from the community. The process, especially if the home team wins, brings a positive 'feel-good' atmosphere to the school and the whole prison. It also gives validity to the educational achievements of the students in a non-conventional process, which moves away from traditional methods of assessment.

These activities also allow inmates to show a positive side of the prison population, so often portrayed in negative stereotypes by the media. The Council of Europe argues that "the world inside a prison is not totally cut off from that outside...Education within prison should be closely linked with the provision outside – education should represent a strong involvement by the outside community" (Council of Europe, 1990, p.57). Activities that connect with the outside community give prisoners an opportunity to change the damaging perceptions of inmates so prevalent in the world outside the prison walls. In bringing the outside in, it is also beneficial to bring the inside out and eventually help communities appreciate that the individual in prison is more than just a label or statistic. Too often the crime and sentence defines the individual. Activities organized by the school also might help the community to recognize the contribution prisoners can make to society and accept inmates back into the world after a period inside.

In Ireland, in the last number of years, the prison authorities have introduced televisions into each cell. While the authorities may claim this is to bring the outside into the prison, and reduce the isolation of the inmates, the underlying reason behind this must be questioned. Watching television is probably one of the easiest ways in the modern world, to use Dickens' phrase, to make the mind into a moribund state. When Joseph Hallinan was researching his book on the rise of the supermax prison in America, he was reminded by a prison governor about the benefits of television in prison, "not because TV rehabilitates, but because...television acts like 'electric Thorazine'. It keeps inmates tranquil, and a tranquil inmate is a cheap inmate" (Hallinan, 2003, p.11). In an attempt to circumvent the possible negative effects of prolonged access to television, our school has asked the prison authorities to include educational channels in the package available to students. The television can be used a teaching tool. We can

also use the television to advertise the activities of the school and also reach out to those with literacy difficulties. We have also put on a concert and a play that was beamed into every cell when we were not in the prison, leaving a presence after school hours. This project is in its infancy but it is an attempt to challenge the thinking behind the provision of in-cell television with a positive pedagogical outcome. It is another attempt at imagination that teachers must use to circumvent the negativity of the prison regime.

A sense of awareness of a student's present position and future possibilities are essential in any adult education experience. Activities that recognize this and empower students are especially welcome within prison. Teachers should also strive to encourage students to believe in their capability to embrace education to its fullest and achieve their potential. Antonio Gramsci believed that by a variety of activities, including the exercise of a skill, or knowledge of a language, every individual demonstrates the capacity for intellectual activity. (Joll, 1977, p.91). He argued that the intellectual realm was not conceived of as specialized functions confined to a narrow elite, but is an integral part of political struggle grounded in everyday life. He developed the concept of the Organic Intellectual, which he argued must be an organic part of, and come from their community (Boggs, 1976, p.76). Organic Intellectuals in prison are powerful in drawing others to the school. A prisoner who has been successful in an examination or has had an inspirational learning experience acts as a more positive advocate for the school than any advertisement by a dynamic teacher or an outstanding programme. A belief in oneself is a liberating experience for a student and all our activities should be designed to realise that potential. We should speak the language of possibility with our students. We should encourage our students to imagine a different world, for themselves, their families, their communities and encourage them to play a part in that new world.

### Courage

As educators we must have the courage to challenge our own practice and try to move away from traditional pedagogy and taken for granted practice. If we challenge students to think critically, we must also be prepared to engage in critical reflection ourselves. We should have the courage to constantly explore, challenge and interrogate our practice and not succumb to routine, either as part of the regime or worse, to become institutionalized. Brookfield has pointed out that our perceptions as to what we provide as educators can be different to those of our learners. We should constantly have the courage to discuss with our students the educational programme and offer them the opportunity to critique it. He concluded, "You may be unagreeably surprised at the degree of discrepancy between what you thought you were doing and what participants perceived as the object of the exercise" (Brookfield, 1986, p.256).

It is important to remember that the activities in the school can be anathema to the daily routine within the prison. It is one of the few activities that inmates participate in voluntarily and when in class, they are encouraged to take responsibility. As Forster points out: "In a largely uniformed and 'gubernial' institution, participation in the education programme engages the prisoner in a whole new range of relationships" (Forster, 1981, p.64). This is a new and radical departure from the regime and may initially be resisted by students who have become institutionalized. We must have the courage to take risks, to move beyond imprisonment and to try to normalise the educational experience. Any adult education programme, inside or outside prison should be based on trust, mutuality, respect and the willingness to strive for equality in the learning space. It is difficult to create a trusting learning

environment in an institution that is built on mistrust. Tami Potter pointed this out in her study of teacher leadership in US prisons.

"A trusting learning environment is also very important in the collaborative process, nonetheless one that is arduous to attain in the correctional setting...Listening builds trust and creditability in a relationship because it shows interest in the person and validates their being." (Potter, 2001, p.122)

Wright believes, that as teachers, we view our students in a different way to the prison authorities. We resist the tendency of the prison system "to focus on the past, the crime, the criminal history and deficits that overshadow the students' present/presence and future. Often prison staff sees prisoners through the rear-view mirror of their crimes" (Wright, 2004, p.202). As educators we immerse students and ourselves in what he terms "future-orientated practices". (Wright, 2004, p.202).

William Rentzmann has noted astutely that "it is extremely important that teaching methods take into account that many prisoners have suffered many defeats in their school time and need some victories to become motivated to start and stick with a course of education" (Rentzmann, 1996, p.63). Many of our learners have had a negative educational experience in the past and recognition of the difficulties that lie ahead will be comforting as the process develops. We should strive to create a safe environment for learners where they can grow and develop the confidence to take a chance. We should have the courage to listen to our students, act on their concerns, admit our failures and constantly reflect on our practice. Working in any educational environment can be difficult but our pedagogy will be enhanced if we acknowledge that we will never achieve a perfect educational space either inside or outside the walls of a prison. The late Palestinian academic and critic Edward Said, in an interview in 1999 explained the difficulties of communication in an educational setting.

"I have been teaching for over forty years, yet even today I go into class and I feel profoundly nervous. I always feel I am on the edge of intelligibility, of inaccuracy. It's a very precarious sense, but I think it's terribly important to persist in it and not settle into a routine." (Pollock, 1999, p.8)

#### Conclusion

The prison system is a confused and contested concept, but generally inward looking and negative. Operating within such an institution is difficult, especially when there are many different agendas vying for dominance. The environment can be claustrophobic, the regime dehumanising and most of our learners have had a negative experience of school first time round. However, it is up to educationalists to try to create a space for learning, both physically and philosophically. We should not adopt or adapt to an agenda created by the state or institution that can be inimical to the objectives of pedagogy. Teaching in such an institution requires in the words of Jane Thompson, "vigilance, imagination, courage and taking the trouble to be free" (Thompson, 1996, p.23).

Despite the many negatives, however, there is much that can give us hope. If we seek to provide a counter culture to the prison regime philosophically and psychologically we can achieve tremendous results in such a negative institution. Our greatest asset is the humanity and co-operation that we bring to our profession. In an interview in 2002, the Governor of the Mountjoy Prison, where I teach, reflected on the problems with the prison.

"Even in a Victorian, useless, outdated building like Mountjoy [Prison], a certain



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amount can be done if you have the right contact with people...I would say myself that the measurement of it would be that the buildings, facilities and structures are about twenty five percent of the importance and the other seventy five percent is the human relationship, the indicators to the prisoner that he is a human being treated with dignity and respect". (Lonergan, 2002, pp.17-18)

Education can play a central role in giving people that dignity and respect. It can limit the damage that prison does to a human being. In the rather antiquated words of Dickens, education can prevent the mind from becoming a moribund state and give students the opportunity to reflect on the possibility that together in a collaborative process we all have a part to play in the busy action of the world.

